Pre-Christian Ireland

From Early Settlers to the Celtic Culture

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ANCIENT IRELAND TIMELINE

OLD STONE AGE	MIDDLE STONE AGE	NEW STONE AGE	BRONZE AGE	IRON AGE AND THE CELTS	EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND
	8000 BC	4000 BC	2300 BC	500 BC	400 AD
No evidence of people in Ireland.	Mesolithic period. The first settlers arrive. They hunt and gather for food. They are nomadic.	Neolithic period. The first farmers in Ireland. They keep animals and grow crops. Newgrange is constructed.	First use of metal. Copper and tin are mixed to make bronze.	Iron replaced bronze. The Celts arrive.	Missionaries bring Christianity to Ireland. Monasteries are established.

The Mesolithic Era (8000 BC)

- Mesolithic - Middle Stone (Age)
- They lived by hunting, fishing and gathering, moving from place to place and building campsites like the one you see here
- Used microliths (tiny stone chips) to make blades, arrows and harpoons; later they started using much heavier blades of stone.
- This way of life was so successful that it lasted, virtually unchanged, for 3000 years.

Neolithic Era

(4000 -2500BC)

Settlers began to build megaliths!

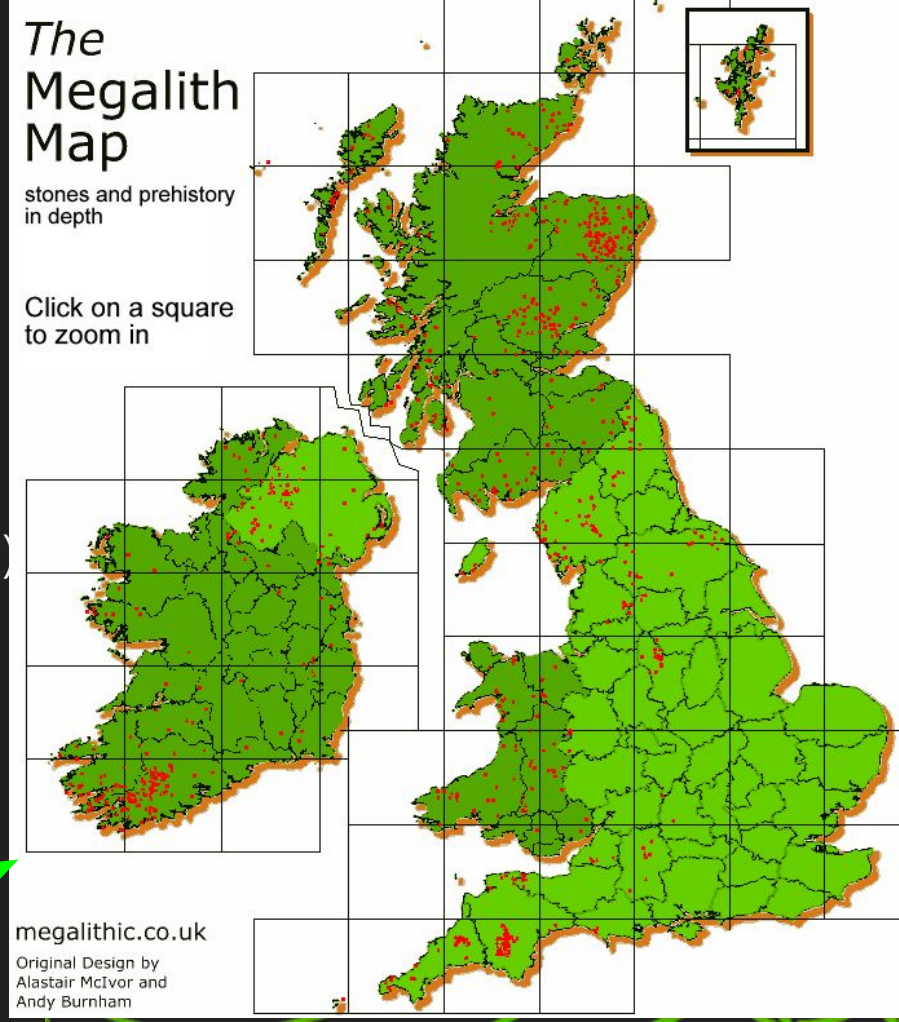
- Neolith - New Stone (Age)
- Farming communities begin to appear
- They began to clear farmland, planting wheat and keeping cattle, sheep, goats and pigs.
- Results: They tended to stay in the same place for much longer - more-permanent houses were built (much like the ones seen here)
- Beginning of pottery, which was useful for cooking and storing food and drink

Megalithic Tombs (Megalith - 'Big Stone')

Reasons for Megalithic 'Tombs':

- Burials (usually multiple/cremated remains)
- Territorial markers
- Tracking astronomical movements
- Places of worship, either of the ancestors or the gods

Click!



Cairn: a human-made pile of stones

4 Types of Megalithic Tombs:

- Passage tombs - the inner chamber is reached through a long tunnel
- Court-tombs (aka Court Cairns) - have a courtyard in front of the main entrance
- Wedge-tombs - the internal chambers are wedge-shaped
- Portal tombs (aka Dolmens - ‘stone table’) - have a giant capstone partly balanced on two ‘portal’ or entrance stones.

There are about 1,500 megalithic tombs in Ireland!

Brú na Bóinne (Constructed during Neolithic Era)

- Means the ‘palace’ or the ‘mansion’ of the Boyne
- Contains one of the world’s most important prehistoric landscapes
- Dominated by the three well-known large passage tombs, Knowth, Newgrange and Dowth
- Ninety additional monuments in the area makes this one of the most significant archaeological complexes in terms of scale, density of monuments and the material evidence that accompanies them.
- The Brú na Bóinne tombs, in particular Knowth, contain the largest assemblage of megalithic art in Western Europe.

Newgrange (340 ft x 39 ft)

- Built circa 3200 BC (that's older than Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids of Giza!)

- A passage tomb, but also labeled as an Ancient Temple because of its astrological, spiritual, religious and ceremonial importance
- The passageway within Newgrange is just less than 60 feet long and leads into a chamber with three side recesses.
- This chamber is roofed by a corbelled vault, which has remained intact and watertight without any conservation or repair.
- The cairn that covers the chamber is estimated to weigh 200,000 tons

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Knowth (40 ft x 220 ft)

- Surrounded by 127 kerbstones
- Contains 2 independent passages
- Like Newgrange, it contains three recesses and basin stones into which the cremated remains may have been placed
- Knowth contains a third of the of megalithic art in all of Western Europe
- Motifs include: spirals, lozenges, circles, and crescent shapes

kerbstones-solid enclosure of stones that sits around a grave to mark its boundary in a solid, decorative way)

Dowth (The forgotten one)

- Surrounded by kerbstones, some of them decorated
- The mound is 280 feet in diameter and 47 feet high
- Unprofessionally excavated in 1847 - accounts for the crater in the center of the mound
- Two passage tombs were discovered on the western side.
- Aligns with the winter solstice, illuminating decorated stones

Not far from Brú na Bóinne...

In the summer of 2018, a drone flying nearby spotted some unusual ‘crop marks.’

Henge -
a prehistoric monument consisting of a circle of stone or woode

A major shift occurs...

- Circa 2500 BC
- Major climate change: became colder and wetter, bogs started to grow and most of the great Stone Age tombs were abandoned.
- A new type of burial appears: a single body placed on its side, usually in a cist (a stone box), along with special pottery and the first metal objects.
- The Bronze Age had begun...

Bronze Age (2500-500 BC)

- Not just bronze, there was gold too
- Bronze started out as just copper - later, the combination of tin and copper produced bronze - a much stronger metal
- Through archeological findings, we can see that the Bronze Age ushered in a new ‘heroic’ age, which emphasized the importance of warriors and combat

- The metalwork is magnificent, particularly in new weaponry (like swords, shields and spears) and in huge bronze cauldrons for feasting

The Artsy side of the Bronze Age

Bronze led to a more efficient and effective lifestyle, allowing more time for other, more creative pursuits, which led to the beginning of a more artistic culture.

Two early forms of metal artistry:

- Sun Discs - Gold was hammered flat until a thin sheet. Then a circular disc was cut out using a sharp tool.
- The decoration was made using a technique called Repoussé (where the design was hammered in from behind so that it stood up in relief in the front)

- Lunula - Made the same way as sun discs, only a crescent shape was cut out
- Decorated with a technique called Incision (cutting or incising into the surface using a sharp tool)
- Typical designs were chevrons (zig- zags) and lozenges (diamond shapes).

Bog hoards & offerings

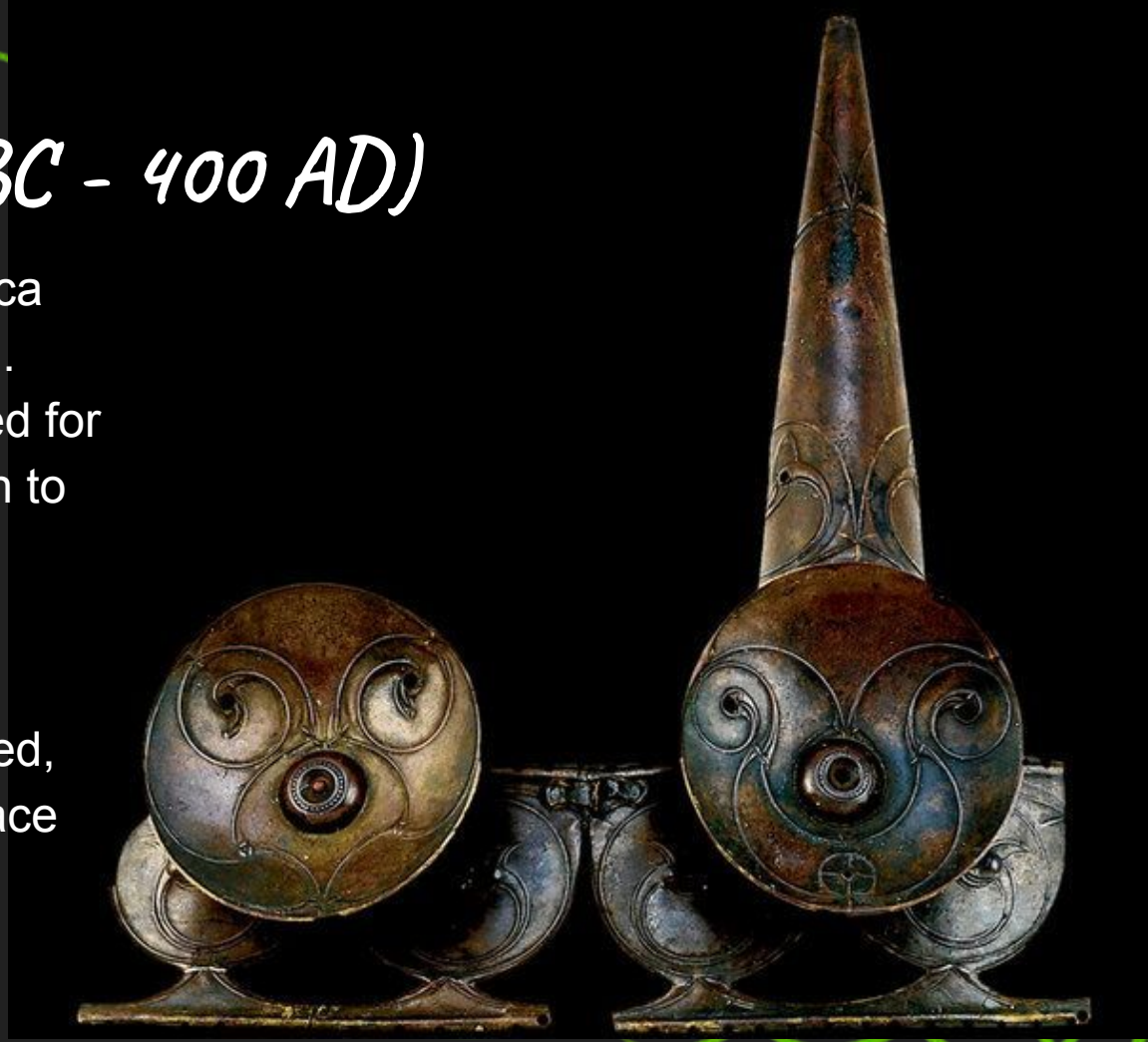
- Many artifacts have been found in wet places, often in great hoards.
- These were most likely ritual deposits, deliberately cast into pools and bogs.
- The changing climate may have led people to believe that the water-gods were angry and started to make them offerings.
- Another reason could have been for ‘storage’

The Mysterious Stone Circles

- Built during the Bronze Age, stone circles are found all across Ireland
- May be connected with some form of sky worship
- Burials are sometimes found inside the circles, but whether these represent sacrifices, or sanctification of the circle, or simply burial of honoured dead is unknown.
- Rows of standing stones were also erected around this time

Iron Age (500 BC - 400 AD)

- With the Celtic ‘invasion’ circa 500 BC, the Iron Age began.
- Though bronze was still used for artistic purposes, iron began to replace bronze tools and weaponry.
- Within a century, Ireland's Bronze Age culture had faded, and Celtic culture was in place across the entire island



So... who were these Celts?

- The Celts were an Iron Age people who lived in Europe from circa 450 - 50 BC.
- They were migratory traders and warriors, possibly descendants of an earlier European people
- The Celts interacted, traded and warred with other cultures, including the Greeks and Romans.
- At their high point, the Celts controlled much of Europe to the Mediterranean, but they were eventually beaten back, retrenching to places including Ireland.

The Celts were a loose configuration of tribes rather than a cohesive kingdom, one of the eventual reasons for their downfall. While they were a powerful and feared fighting force, they couldn't overtake the more centrally controlled Roman Empire.

La Tene Art Style (aka the Celtic style)

- Artists who worked in this style demonstrated advanced skills, including the use of specialized tools acquired from many places.
- They created pottery and carved in stone.
- They were expert goldsmiths who also excelled in metalwork with bronze, iron and silver.

Some techniques:

- Gilding - covering surfaces with thin layers of precious metals
- Hammering - pounding surfaces so they are flat or using forms to press them into patterns.
- Objects sometimes featured more than one technique.
- The Celts also incorporated precious materials such as ivory, amber and coral into their objects, (gained in trade)

La Tene designs

- La Tene is a decorative style that was unique, full of scrolling geometric designs incorporating spirals and knots.
- Some designs include the <u>triskele</u> (a triple connected spiral form)
- Many surfaces had elaborate <u>curvilinear</u> (or bending and curving), abstract designs and swirling patterns on them.
- Also featured leaf and foliage patterns, as well as variations on real and imaginary animals such as dragons.

The Ogham

- Ogham: Irish alphabet, consisting of twenty characters formed by parallel strokes on either side of or across a continuous line
- The Ogham script recorded the earliest Old Irish texts dating between the 3rd and the 6th century CE.
- Mostly they are genealogical inscriptions in the form of "X son of Y" on corners of large stone slabs.
- When inscribed on stones, Ogham is written vertically from bottom to top.

Can you spell your name in Ogham?

aicme b (first aicme)

beith	luis	fern	sail	nion
(birch)	(rowan)	(alder)	(willow)	(ash)
b	l	f	s	n
[b]	[l]	[w]	[s]	[n]

aicme h (second aicme)

uath	dair	tinne	coll	ceirt
(hawthorn)	(oak)	(holly)	(hazel)	(apple)
h	d	t	c	q
[y]	[d]	[t]	[k]	[k^w]

aicme m (third aicme)

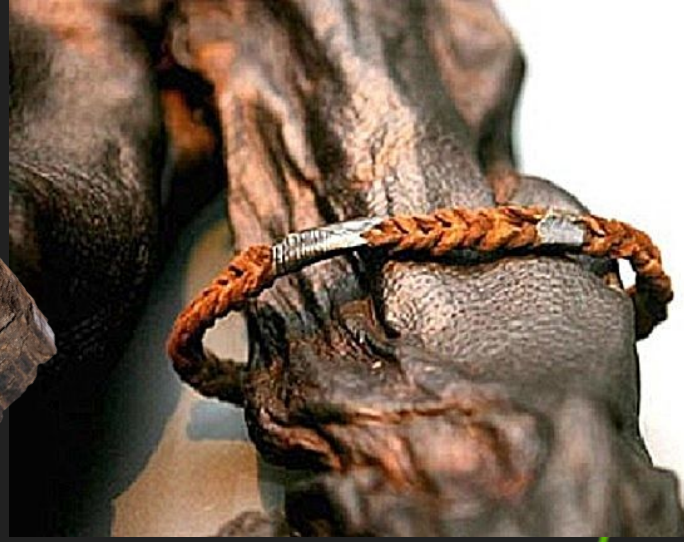
muin	gort	ngéadal	straif	ruis
(vine)	(ivy)	(reed)	(blackthorn)	(elder)
m	g	ng	z	r
[m]	[g]	[g^w]	[sw/ts]	[r]

aicme a (forth aicme)

ailm	onn	úr	eadhadh	iodhadh
(white fir)	(gorse)	(heather)	(poplar)	(yew)
a	o	u	e	i
[a]	[o]	[u]	[e]	[i]

Back to the Bogs… the sequel

- During the Iron Age, bogs were used for more than treasure hoards and offerings…
- Bodies of men, women, and even children have been found, wonderfully preserved
- The bodies range from peasants to kings and tell us a lot about ancient Ireland
- Many of them were tortured before being killed, suggesting violent ritualistic deaths/sacrifice



THE SCIENCE OF BOG BODIES
SciShow

Folklore

There are 4 Cycles of Irish/Celtic Mythology

- Mythological Cycle
- Ulster Cycle
- Fenian Cycle
- Historical Cycle

Mythological Cycle

Paganism - a derogatory term for a pre-Christian, polytheistic religion (a heathen)
Polytheistic - the belief of more than one god

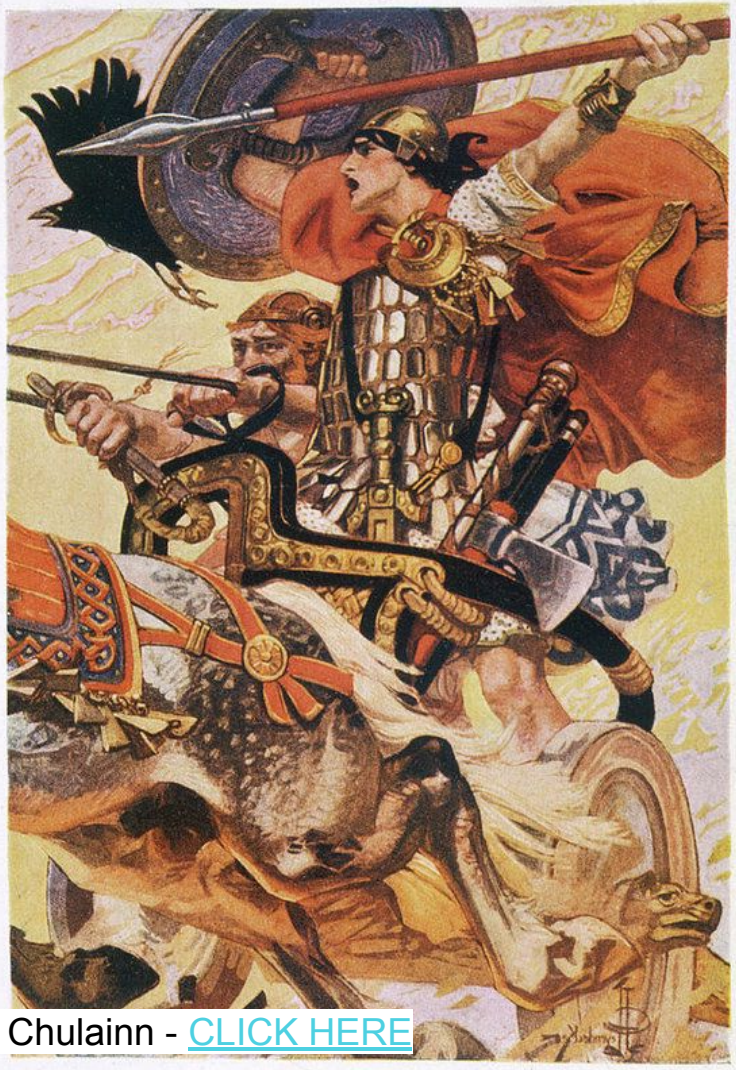
- The Mythological Cycle is the earliest cycle and is the least well preserved.
- It tells stories of gods and supernatural events.
- Written in times of paganism
- This cycle narrates through five migratory invasions of Ireland.
- Instead of telling how people came to be, it tells of how people came from elsewhere to Ireland.
- Within the Mythological cycle there are hundreds of tales in prose and verse, some entirely mythological and some pseudo-history.

Famous Stories: Children of Lir.

Children of Lir

Ulster Cycle

- This cycle contains tales from the first century AD; a time of heroes and warfare.
- These stories center mainly around heroes within the Ulaid province.
- Famous Stories: the adventures of the warrior Cu Chulainn (also known as Cuchulainn) along with his friends, enemies and lovers.
- Some characters from the mythological cycle reappear.



If you are interested in a very sarcastic, PG13 retelling of Cu Chulainn - CLICK HERE

Fenian Cycle

- The Fenian Cycle was written in the 3rd century AD and is based in the provinces of Munster and Leinster.
- The stories center on heroes hunting, fighting and adventuring.
- Famous Stories: Most tales focus on the life of the brave hero Fionn Mac Cumhail (Finn Mac Cool).

If you are interested in a very sarcastic, PG13 retelling of Finn Mac Cool - CLICK HERE

Historical Cycle (aka The Cycle of the Kings)

- This cycle was written between 200 AD to 475 AD; the time when Irish religion was moving from Paganism to Christianity.
- This is reflected in the changing content of the stories.
- The tales centered around kings rather than gods and lacked the supernatural aspect.
- This cycle contains more historical stories than the previous three

Famous story: There many collections but one of the largest groups contains stories surrounding Cormac mac Airt, the King of Ireland, and his ancestors.

Now for a brief intermission….

Act Two: Enter St. Patrick, Christianity and the Medieval Times